

I Hate the News

Some people start their day by reading *The New York Times*. Others end it by watching the nightly news. Some get it from *The Daily Show*. Others download it from a variety weblogs. Some keep up-to-the-minute by following CNN. Others have instant news updates automatically text messaged to their phone. But everybody seems to agree: it's a citizen's responsibility to keep up with the news. Everybody except me.

I think following the news is a waste of time.

Some people agree with me on a small scale. Some point out that the cable channels are obsessed with bizarre crimes that have little larger impact, that they worry too much about horse-race coverage of politics, that too much of the news is filled with PR-inserted nonsense. But they do this because they think these are aberrations; that underneath all this, the news is worth saving. I simply go one step further: I think none of it is worthwhile.

Let us look at the front page of today's *New York Times*, the gold standard in news. In the top spot there is a story about Republicans feuding among themselves. There is a photo of soldiers in Iraq. A stock exchange chief must return \$100M. There is a concern about some doctors over-selling a nerve testing system. There is a threat from China against North Korea. There is a report that violence in Iraq is rising. And there is concern about virtual science classes replacing real ones.

None of these stories have relevance to my life. Reading them may be enjoyable, but it's an enjoyable waste of time. They will have no impact on my actions one way or another.

Most people will usually generally concede this point, but suggest that there's something virtuous about knowing it anyway, that it makes me a better citizen. They point out that newspapers are a key part of our democracy, that by exposing wrong-doing to the people, they force the wrong-doers to stop.

This seems to be true, but the curious thing is that I'm never involved. The government commits a crime, the *New York Times* prints it on the front page, the people on the cable chat shows foam at the mouth about it, the government apologizes and commits the crime more subtly. It's a valuable system — I certainly support the government being more subtle about committing crimes (well, for the sake of argument, at least) — but you notice how it never involves me? It seems like the whole thing would work just as well even if nobody ever read the *Times* or watched the cable chat shows. It's a closed system.

There is voting, of course, but to become an informed voter all one needs to do is read a short guide about the candidates and issues before the election. There's no need to have to suffer through the daily back-and-forth of allegations and counter-allegations, of scurrilous lies and their refutations. Indeed, reading a voter's guide is much better: there's no recency bias (where you only remember the crimes reported in the past couple months), you get to hear both sides of the story after the investigation has died down, you can actually think about the issues instead of worrying about the politics.

Others say that sure, most of the stuff in the news isn't of use, but occasionally you'll come across some story that will lead you to actually change what you've been working on. But really, how plausible is this? Most people's major life changes don't come from reading an article in the newspaper; they come from reading longer-form essays or thoughtful books, which are much more convincing and detailed.

Which brings me to my second example of people agreeing with me on the small scale. You'll often hear TV critics say that CNN's up-to-the-minute reporting is absurd. Instead of saying, "We have unconfirmed reports that—This just in! We now have confirmed reports that those unconfirmed reports have been denied. No, wait! There's a new report denying the confirmation of the denial of the unconfirmed report." and giving viewers whiplash, they suggest that the reporters simply wait until a story is confirmed before reporting it and do commentary in the meantime.

But if that's true on a scale of minutes, why longer? Instead of watching hourly updates, why not read a daily paper? Instead of reading the back and forth of a daily, why not read [a weekly review](#)? Instead of a weekly review, why not read a monthly magazine? Instead of a monthly magazine, why not read an annual book?

With the time people waste reading a newspaper every day, they could have read an entire book about most subjects covered and thereby learned about it with far more detail and far more impact than the daily doses they get dribbled out by the paper. But people, of course, wouldn't read a book about most subjects covered in the paper, because most of them are simply irrelevant.

But finally, I'd like to argue that following the news isn't just a waste of time, it's actively unhealthy. Edward Tufte notes that when he used to read the *New York Times* in the morning, it scrambled his brain with so many different topics that he couldn't get any real intellectual work done the rest of the day.

The news's obsession with having a little bit of information on a wide variety of subjects means that it actually gets most of those subjects wrong. (One need only read the blatant errors reported in the corrections page to get some sense of the more thorough-going errors that must lie beneath them. And, indeed, anyone who has ever been in the news will tell you that the news always gets the story wrong.) Its obsession with the criminal and the deviant makes us less trusting people. Its obsession with the hurry of the day-to-day makes us less reflective thinkers. Its obsession with surfaces makes us shallow.

This is not simply an essay meant to provoke; I genuinely believe what I write. I have not followed the news at least since I was 13 (with occasional lapses on particular topics). My life does not seem to be impoverished for it; indeed, I think it has been greatly enhanced. But I haven't found many other people who are willing to take the plunge.

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